A Pretty Good Natural Cipher February 28

On the surface it might seem like a language can't be as good as a cipher. All one has to do seemingly is to learn the said language—or, perhaps, employ a native speaker—and you can read any message. This sounds good, but history has proven that some languages make pretty good natural ciphers. As a case in point, the Native American Codetalkers, e.g., the Navajo, from World War II were basically sending secure message whenever they spoke. The languages were just that difficult. Our adversaries, i.e., Germans, Italians, Japanese, during this war had no knowledge of these languages or direct access to those who knew them. We know of no case where any message transmitted in these languages was ever compromised.

Japanese troops in Manchuria, off to fight the Russians

But what about the Japanese language in an earlier war? The Japanese defeated the Russians in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, a conflict that ended with the Japanese becoming the dominant power in northeast Asia. It is now common knowledge that the Japanese pre-war intelligence preparations against the Russians were a major factor in their success. In his book, *Kempei Tai: A History of the Japanese Secret Service*, Richard Deacon states that the difficulties of their language benefitted the Japanese against the Russians. Indeed, Japanese is rated as one of the more difficult of the Asian languages for foreigners, as it seeks to avoid bluntness in speaking and has a complex writing system. Russia, under the Czars, had language problems. It had little knowledge of Japan, not to mention the language. Deacon estimates that only one in 100,000 Russians could read the printed language and only one in 750,000 if hand written. There were cases of Japanese spies within Russia itself passing themselves off as Chinese or other East Asians.

According to Deacon, the Russians had success against Japanese diplomatic ciphers used in Europe. It was Russian access to a cipher book used by the Japanese embassy in the Netherlands that best explained why two otherwise well-trained and well-prepared undercover Japanese naval intelligence officers in Russia were eventually unmasked in St. Petersburg by Okhrana, the Czarist secret police—which had considerable experience monitoring the communications of internal Russian conspirators. Colonel Motojiro Akashi,* who ran an extensive espionage operation against the Russians in Europe during the war, was notified by a French informant that the Russians "had broken the Japanese code." The Japanese, of course, changed their ciphers when they became aware they had been compromised.

While the CCH continues to research historical cryptology, its Asia specialists know of no episode in which the Japanese broke any major Russian codes during the war.** While Czarist Russia might have been overrated as a military power, its intelligence services had better reputations. Certainly, they had more experience than the Japanese did. The thorough Japanese preparations were mostly, if not entirely, of a HUMINT nature. It is possible, even likely, that foreign nations assisted the Japanese with Russian codes. The British, for example, became allies of the Japanese in 1902. Yet, it is doubtful that any foreign nation helped the Japanese too much with COMSEC. These foreign nations, after all, also wanted to read Japanese codes and ciphers and would not want them strengthened. So, in the final analysis, the Japanese language itself might have been more secure than any Japanese cryptosystem employed at the time.

*Akashi was responsible for fomenting unrest within Russia itself—and there was plenty of it at this time. Among the better known individuals on his payroll were Nikolai Lenin and Sidney Reilly.

**Since Japan scored numerous victories against the Russians during the war, we consider it likely that the Japanese recovered codebooks. However, if any were captured, their actual value to the Japanese remain unknown to CCH.

Sources: Richard Deacon, *Kempei Tai: A History of the Japanese Secret Service* (New York and Toronto: Beaufort Books, Inc., 1983), 42-66; Dennis and Peggy

Warner, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 456-458.

508 caption: a line of Japanese soldiers, with shouldered rifles, marching along a road.